

Time Like

*Practical
Wisdom from the
Book of
Ecclesiastes*

CAROLYN MAHANEY &
NICOLE WHITACRE

“In an age when women are told freedom means being who you are and following your feelings, our dear friends Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre have mined the riches of Ecclesiastes to show us that women who are truly free ‘fear God, enjoy his gifts, and anticipate his future judgment.’ In their new book, *True Life*, they give us biblically rooted, Christ-exalting, and eminently practical ways to walk through the inevitable uncertainties and sorrows of ‘life under the sun’ with faithfulness, thoughtfulness, and joy. Brimming with a bold and God-drenched realism, *True Life* will serve any woman in any season of life.”

Bob and Julie Kauffin, Director, Sovereign Grace Music; Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, Kentucky; author, *Worship Matters* and *True Worship*; and his wife

“This wise book helps us realistically assess our short life ‘under the sun,’ and it encourages us to fear God and to enjoy the life he has ordained for us.”

Andy and Jenni Naselli, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College and Seminary; Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota; and his wife

“When I was twenty years old, I wondered why the book of Ecclesiastes was in the Bible. By age thirty-five it had become precious to me, as it has for countless saints through the ages. This wonderful book will help you see why. Bursting with practical counsel from ‘the Preacher,’ Carolyn and Nicole will help you discover the path to joy as you sojourn through the ‘unhappy business’ of life (Eccles. 1:13).”

Jon Bloom, Cofounder and teacher, Desiring God

True Life

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Practical Wisdom from the Book of Ecclesiastes

Carolyn Mahaney and
Nicole Whitacre

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To Kristin and Janelle—

*Daughters, sisters, and best of friends,
with whom we are blessed
to walk through this Ecclesiastes world.*

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Introduction

True Life

IF WE COULD GIVE one piece of advice to every girl on the eve of graduation, every new wife or soon-to-be mother, every young Christian woman with her feet in the starting blocks of this adventure we call “life,” it would be: *read the book of Ecclesiastes*. This may sound like strange advice, and Ecclesiastes is, to be fair, a strange book. But if you are “in the days of your youth,” then the second-wisest man to ever live wrote it just for you (Eccles. 12:1). He wrote it to tell young people what you can expect to get out of life and how to truly live.

Find Ecclesiastes when you are older, as the two of us did, and it explains a lot. You learn that life didn’t go sideways, it was already crooked (Eccles. 1:15). You realize that all your perplexing questions and confusing experiences really are mysterious, because God made them that way (Eccles. 3:11). Whatever your age, Ecclesiastes diagnoses life’s ills and shows you how to enjoy life anyway.

When someone mentions Ecclesiastes, maybe you think of the opening cry of despair: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles.

1:2). For many early morning Bible readers, these words prompt some head-scratching; they start searching for a more cheerful and less confusing passage for their devotions. Or perhaps you have heard this excerpt from Solomon's famous poem read aloud at a funeral: "A time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccles. 3:2). Beyond that, Ecclesiastes is one of those Old Testament books that we sometimes give a wide berth on our way to the Gospels. But while Ecclesiastes may seem confusing at first, it actually makes sense of much of life's confusion.

Solomon's book contains poetry, snippets of homespun wisdom, and grim exposés on life in the real world, all punctuated with delightful descriptions of the good life. And then at the end of life—death. Ecclesiastes talks a lot about death. Oh, and after death—judgment. Ultimately, Ecclesiastes shows us the fear of the Lord and precisely how it leads us into happy living. While there's no fabric softener or fine sugar-coating, Ecclesiastes is actually a book about joy and how to find it. Solomon explicitly states that in writing Ecclesiastes, he "sought to find words of delight" (Eccles. 12:10).

All of Life for All of Us

Ecclesiastes is a word in season for women in every season. This is not a niche book about a specific problem; it takes in *all of life for all of us*. Ecclesiastes is for the young woman who wants to make a difference in the world for Christ and the same young woman (five years later) who feels like she is only ever changing diapers. It offers counsel for the single woman whose hopes for marriage diminish with each passing year. And it teaches the middle-aged woman—who is caring for her

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*What have been your past impressions of the book of Ecclesiastes?
What do you hope to learn about Ecclesiastes by reading this book?*

elderly mother-in-law and waiting for a text from her daughter at college—how to keep running well.

You see, much of our trouble comes from the fact that we misunderstand the way life truly is. We expect that if we have enough heart and ambition we can achieve our highest goals, only to be confused and disillusioned when our plans go belly-up. *This isn't the way my life was supposed to go!* we cry. To which Solomon tells us, with a shake of his head: this is *exactly* the way life goes. It's not our life that's gone off the rails but our expectations. We are the ones who got it wrong, who mistakenly thought the "bus of life" was headed on a garden tour instead of into a war zone.

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In what ways has life gone differently from what you expected or planned?

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon forces us to face reality. He insists—for the sake of our joy—that we reckon with the way things really are, not the way we want them to be. His goal is to free us from our illusions, and so he gives us the facts about life, straight up: “Uprightly he wrote words of truth” (Eccles. 12:10). If we believe his words of truth about the way life really is, we can learn to truly live.

“It has been said,” writes J. I. Packer, “that the Psalms teach us how to worship; Proverbs, how to behave; Job, how to suffer; Song of Solomon, how to love; and Ecclesiastes, how to live.”¹ Ecclesiastes gives us the wisdom we need to endure life’s hardships and enjoy life’s pleasures. Solomon isn’t offering a free pass around

troubled terrain, but he helps us avoid the pitfalls of bitterness and confusion that come from unrealistic expectations of what we can achieve. He gives us a map of life's topography so we can navigate it bravely and with a smile. Life, explains Solomon, is out of our control and beyond our comprehension. So how, then, do we truly live? The answer is to fear God, enjoy his gifts, and anticipate his future judgment.

Ecclesiastes is a realistic look behind the scenes of life. And whom do we find there? God. In all of the side roads, rabbit trails, riddles, and rants of Ecclesiastes we find our beautiful, mysterious, sovereign, and holy God. The book itself testifies that these are words from God, the "one Shepherd" (Eccles. 12:11). And because all Scripture testifies to Jesus, Ecclesiastes ultimately points to Christ as the revelation of the wisdom of God (John 5:39; 1 Cor. 1:24).

Warming to Ecclesiastes

We began studying Ecclesiastes over a decade ago, thanks to the writings of J. I. Packer: "I warm to Ecclesiastes as a kindred spirit," he would tell people.² Ecclesiastes was his favorite book of the Bible, and since then it has become ours as well. Solomon's little book has taught us how not to be so surprised by life's trouble and how to laugh at the days to come (Prov. 31:25). And while life has only gotten harder in the past ten years, we have never been happier thanks to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. In other words, Ecclesiastes has made us happy, hopeful realists. We want you to be happy, hopeful realists too, so we wrote this book about the book of the Bible that taught us how to enjoy life with God. This book is not a commentary but a testimony—which is, in fact,

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Meditate on these verses from Scripture and consider how Ecclesiastes bears witness to Christ.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:16)

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me. (John 5:39)

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:22–24)

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what Ecclesiastes also is: a first person account of the grace of God through his written word.

In twelve short chapters, Solomon shows us how to *see* life and how to *live* it to the full. But to learn how to really live the Ecclesiastes way, we have to learn how to think like Solomon, “the Preacher” (Eccles. 1:1). Prepare yourself for a mental and emotional renovation project. Solomon’s perspective on life is contrary to many of our dearest beliefs and pet values, so this will be more than a weekend job. Time is needed, which is why we have included questions for further reflection throughout each chapter. In our experience, remodeling our lives to Ecclesiastes specifications was something we had to take the time to do and then do again and again on a regular basis. But it is more than worth the effort.

We hope, by the end of this study, you’ll feel the same as Martin Luther, who writes of Ecclesiastes that “this noble little book” should be “read of all . . . with great carefulness every day.”³ Long after you have put down our book, we hope you will continue to read the book of Ecclesiastes for your joy.

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2

Life Is Uncontrollable

WHEN NICOLE'S CHILDREN were little, they loved riding in the special grocery store cart with the car attached to the front. Tori and Sophie would clamber into the little car with all the enthusiasm of a couple of sixteen-year-olds sporting newly minted licenses. They loved feeling all grown-up, having a job to do; and they did it with gusto. Their chubby hands gripped the wheel. Their arms, like a pair of pistons, pumped incessantly. Big smiles illuminated their little faces. They reveled in the illusion that they were steering Mommy for once, turning the car this way and that, up and down the aisles.

Sometimes we have the same idea, driving through life in our brightly colored cars with shiny plastic wheels. We think we're steering this life thing pretty well, carefully turning down one aisle after another, all according to our plans. Then life veers down the cat litter aisle when we were aiming for the candy aisle. We're puzzled and dismayed: *I never meant to go that direction! What's happening? What did I do wrong? Why isn't life going the way I planned?*

In Ecclesiastes, it's as if Solomon leans his head down, taps the top of the little car, and speaks a few words of truth into our ideas about life in the real world. Life, he explains, is a bit like trying to steer the toy car on the front of the grocery cart. You may think that you're in control, but in reality you're not. Solomon gets straight to the point: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2).

Solomon tells us what navigating life is really like for *everyone*, no exceptions. It is all vanity for all y'all. And not just vanity, but *vanity of vanities*, like the Holy of Holies or Song of Songs. The phrase uses superlative language, the ancient equivalent of an all-caps text. Then Solomon completes the triad: "All is vanity." Nothing is *not* vanity. In fact, he repeats the word for "vanity" no fewer than thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes, and he concludes the book with the same phrase, forming a kind of frame for the entire work. In other words: "Get this! It's my main point!"

Incomprehensible and Uncontrollable

The English word "vanity" doesn't capture all that Solomon is saying here. The word in Hebrew is *hevel*. It means "vapor" or "breath." Merest of breaths. It is, in effect, "the waste product of breathing."¹ It's the air you expel when you exhale. You even push a breath out when you say the word aloud. *Hevel*. That's life. It's the air you send out into the atmosphere. Invisible, expendable, ephemeral. Not even a yawn. So to read it properly you might say: "Merest breath, said the Preacher, merest breath. All is mere breath."²

We certainly don't think of our lives as a mere breath. A journey or a battle or an adventure? *Sure*. But a breath? Hardly the metaphor we would have chosen to represent the meaning and significance of

Life Is Uncontrollable

Nothing is not vanity. Make a list of five of the most important things in your life: relationships or possessions, goals or talents—whatever comes to mind.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Now turn each one into a sentence of Solomonic wisdom:

1. _____ is mere breath.

2. _____ is mere breath.

3. _____ is mere breath.

4. _____ is mere breath.

5. _____ is mere breath.

While this exercise may seem morbid at first, we need to press in to Solomon's main point if we are to become happy, hopeful realists.

our lives. “Vaporous!” certainly doesn’t resonate or inspire. There’s nothing heart-warming about the idea of life as a mere emission of carbon dioxide. And yet, this is the picture Solomon gives us.

Life Is Uncontrollable

Here's the thing about a breath: try as you might, you can't grasp it. You can't hold onto it, not even for a second. Like your physical beauty, which is "vain"—there's that word *hevel* again—you can't keep it (Prov. 31:30). A mere breath is not a thing you can grasp *tangibly* and clutch between your hands. And you cannot grasp it *intellectually* either. What does the breath we exhale mean anyway? What is the significance of a sigh? How many breaths will we take in our lifetime? There's no way we can possibly plan or decide or know. Breath eludes us, as does all of life. In other words, life is incomprehensible and uncontrollable. It's beyond our ability to understand or manage. This is reality. We can't seize the wheel of life and steer our own course with the top down and the wind in our hair. Neither can we explain life with a string of clever memes. Like a toddler in a grocery car, navigating life is beyond our comprehension and outside our control. This is the way life truly is.

The Illusion of Control

Evidence of our lack of control abounds, whether we realize it or not. Think about it: How often does life go contrary to what you expect or plan? You believe God helped you find a great house in a great neighborhood, only you couldn't sell your current home, and the contract fell through. The new guy at church seems godly, and maybe even interested in you, but then he asked your roommate out on a date. Perhaps you worked hard to get a small business off the ground, only for it to go under despite your best efforts. Or you tried to give all your children the same affection and opportunities, but one of them still struggles to make his way in the world.

Most of us don't interpret setbacks and reversals as Solomon did. When things don't go the way we planned or hoped, we're confused or disconsolate. But how should we think about disappointments, really? Solomon says the ability to manage the outcome of your work, relationships, and circumstances was never in your control in the first place. All the times things *did* go the way you planned were only your illusion of control. You only *thought* you were managing things while, like the child in the grocery car, you have no real control over the direction your life takes. Not a pleasant thought at first, but it is reality. Everything is *hevel*, remember? It's a breath.

"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." JAMES 4:14

The Default Setting: Brief, Baffling, Bad

Years ago, slander and false accusations wreaked havoc on our family and ministry. Godly reputations were destroyed, Christian fellowship was broken, and the slander laid waste to years of fruitful ministry. At the time, we thought our lives might as well have careened off the road and plunged over a cliff. But our expectations of the way life was supposed to go needed to be adjusted. Our illusion that we could manage life (if we worked hard and obeyed God), or that we could figure it all out (if we diligently searched the Scriptures and got counsel from other believers), needed to be stripped away. Ecclesiastes brought us the comfort of knowing

Life Is Uncontrollable

Physical beauty is hevel. Even if you have it, you can't hold on to it for long. As with beauty, so it is with life. What else in your life this past year has been "like a breath"—impossible to hold on to or keep?

Life is not only uncontrollable, it is incomprehensible too. Even if we think we have it all figured out, our sense of clarity can evaporate in a moment. Is there anything about your life that you are confused about today?

that our experience was not unique to the Christian. The fact is: all of life is vanity for all of us.

Trouble and trials, envy and betrayal, setbacks and sorrow are all part of the treacherous terrain we travel through life on our way to death. Brief, baffling, and bad are *normal* conditions for life's journey. We can't control how long or short our lives will be; we can't fathom why things do or don't happen the way they do; and we can't take a detour around life's hazardous roads. The unexpected is exactly what we should expect from life here, in Solomon's words, "under the sun" (Eccles. 1:3).

Stop Making Life So Hard on Yourself

We hope you can begin to see the relevance of this little book of the Old Testament. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon breaks into our frantic and futile efforts to control the uncontrollable, to comprehend the incomprehensible, and he gives us some advice: life is gonna be hard, so stop making it so hard on yourself. What is the point, Solomon asks, of trying to control people and circumstances when your life is a mere breath? What is the point of gripping the wheel so tightly when it is not connected to the tires?

Only when you recognize that life is incomprehensible and uncontrollable can you actually enjoy the ride through the grocery store of life. You can sit back and relax, turn the wheel for fun if you like! Take in the variety of cereals and pastas, enjoy exotic fruits like kumquats and kiwis or the smells of cinnamon and rye. Anticipate the goodness of God around every corner, and rest in his providence over all. He knows where you are going and why you are going there. He is in control. And that is enough.

Life Is Uncontrollable

Read Romans 8:20–28. The apostle Paul also understood that life is vanity. In fact, the word translated as “futility” in verse 20 is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew hevel. How does Paul point us to hope as we “groan inwardly” (v. 23) in this vain world?
